

Faith in the Workplace

Keith McMillan SJ

'The capitalist system provides the opportunity to exploit others through greed and arrogance; it also provides individual and corporate opportunities to serve humanity.' On the feast of St Homobonus, the patron saint of business people, Keith McMillan SJ introduces us to a method of helping those in the business world to bring the values of their faith to their professional life. How can one be both a good Christian and a successful business leader?

There are many villains to whom we might attribute some blame for the recent global financial crisis. But suspects never mentioned are Hollywood, playwrights, novelists, and television producers. These cultural actors may seem very remote and incidental to the financial crisis, but as creators of our common culture they very rarely, if ever, create positive role models for business and financial leaders. On the contrary, when such leaders are characterised in novels, plays or in topical TV programmes it is as the foil for our heroes. It becomes the norm that the business executive is the baddy in detective stories.

In the history of modern literature, business leaders who are heroes because of their business activities are extremely rare. This fact is highlighted by exception. Jean Valjean from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* has a choice that would radically transform the village of Montreuil-sur-mer. Having established a flourishing business there, he is confronted with the dilemma of whether or not to reveal his true identity as an escaped convict in order to save an innocent man, with the consequence that the town would be left in a desperate economic state. His entrepreneurial skill had created this stark choice.

Popular culture serves a utilitarian purpose, putting forth role models to make explicit the virtues and characters we wish to encourage. If it never presents business or financial leaders as providing cultural and



social goods, then it is also stating that it does not expect them to provide such goods. The consequence of not providing any inspiration to business leaders is that the cultural creators can sit back and say: 'We told you so.' Having expected evil acts, when such acts occur one can assume that one was always correct and the negative expectations of the perpetrators, in this case business leaders, are confirmed. This anti-virtuous spiral continues unless the creative cultural actors come to the

realisation that in many ways this Frankenstein is in part their own creation.

The Catholic Church might also be accused of playing a part in that disinterested cultivation of virtuous business leaders. Since the time of Leo XIII, the Church has developed a significant social teaching, including a discussion of the individual's role in economic activity. However, for the most part, the teaching would stay at the theoretical and theological level. In consequence, the faithful business leader would be confronted with demanding and challenging principles intended to guide one's involvement the economy, without being offered practical ways of implementing these. For some, the tension between living a faithful Christian life and being a successful business leader was too conflicted; many would bracket out their faith while engaging in commerce. The result of this was that many a Christian would engage in activity that consumes most of their waking hours but was isolated from the core of their existence: faith.

Within the British business community there have been various groups that facilitate the connection between Christian ideals and the practice of engaging in commerce. [CABE](#) was started for Catholic managers in 1938, but since Vatican II it has been an ecumenical group. [Faith in Business](#) at Ridley Hall, Cambridge aspires to connect theological reflection with business activity. It aims both at involving business leaders in this theological reflection and preparing ministers to serve business leaders. Various other organisations also aspire to meet the challenges (see the [links page at CABE](#)).

Since 2000, there has been a movement in the UK based on the Woodstock Business Conference. This started in Washington, DC when a Jesuit priest at the Woodstock Theological Centre at Georgetown University, during a regular weekend supply saying mass in a Virginian suburb of Washington, gathered a group of lawyers who wanted to meet to reflect on and discuss their work issues in light of their faith. After a few years of planning, two groups at St. Paul's Cathedral and one group at Westminster Cathedral started using the material from the US. Shortly after these meetings began, the groups judged that the material was too culturally bound to the US and also slightly dated. Through the Heythrop Institute of Religion, Ethics and Public Life, the renamed Business and Leadership Forums settled on a format that has since prospered in the London area. There are now a number of groups throughout the Diocese of London, within the Methodist Church in the City and, in addition to the group at Westminster Cathedral, there are two groups active at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Wimbledon.

Each group, of roughly a dozen members, meets on a monthly basis, for one and a half hours. The first part of the meeting is a period of silent reflective prayer on a passage from scripture, usually from one of the gospels. After ten minutes of contemplative prayer based on Ignatian spirituality, members share their insights and reflection. Eventually the discussion moves to a thought piece, which all members would have read before the meeting. The two-page piece has some connection to the scriptural reading and the theme for the day. The meeting ends with the chaplain recalling moments of reflection in the meeting and a group act of thanksgiving. Minutes of the meeting noting the themes discussed are sent to all members of the group.

The thought pieces have been commissioned by the Heythrop Institute and the Institute at St. Paul's. At this point there are three years' worth of material, under the themes of 'vocation', 'virtues' and 'leadership'. In addition, each month a contemplative aid to lead members in their imaginative reflection on the gospel passage is provided.

The overall process is simple. At the outset, that simplicity may be deceptive to some new members. However, the simplicity is key to the fruitfulness of the meetings. Sometimes the fruit of the reflection on the scripture can consume much of the meeting. The context of the thought pieces appears richer after having shared reflections. The best meetings are those in which the reflections on the scripture and on the thought piece interweave in the discussion. In addition, members become increasingly comfortable with the process and one another, such that the depth of reflection and discussion grows over time. Individuals may at times mention a situation they are facing in the workplace and use the meeting to gain insight.

The simplicity of the method allows the Holy Spirit to weave insight within the group and individuals. The lack of busyness, of activity to fill the time, is a key component. Initially, some individuals may feel uncomfortable sitting in silence in groups, during the imaginative contemplation or waiting for members to reflect; however, eventually that period of silence can be treasured.

I provide a quote from a member from the Wimbledon group where the program is called Faith in the Workplace (FIWP).

I came into FIWP as a skeptic. I have never found contemplating scripture rewarding or enlightening, and I can be very narrow-minded. I was unsure what, if anything, this approach could bring to the way in which I worked. I had always consciously chosen to keep my faith and work apart.

From the outset the signs were there that I could safely link the two. The structured, agenda-style meeting immediately made me feel comfortable. I was totally surprised at how powerful reading a short piece of scripture in a small group can be. What really works for me is then having ten minutes of complete silence to reread the piece over and over again, or just to sit and let my imagination work. Ten minutes does not sound very long but what I have realised is that I never have ten

minutes to think things through and so I start to look at things from a different perspective. This technique is the single biggest thing that I have taken back with me into my work. I do not make such hasty decisions under pressure. I always now try to take time to be calm and to give myself just ten more minutes. This way I feel my decisions and thoughts are of a better quality.

The discussions we then go on to have around the piece of scripture are fascinating. At every meeting I am always surprised at how a group of people can see things in so many different ways. Again, this is a powerful observation that I take back with me to the workplace. Most of the time, but not always, we do manage to relate the piece of scripture to behaviours we may or may not demonstrate at work. When this happens and we start to really share some of the aspects of our work challenges, I really feel the power of the group helping us to work through a problem.

I still do not bring my faith into my work in an evangelical way. But I hope that my colleagues have noticed the subtle changes in the way that I work and some of the decisions I make.

In summary the FIWP program has become a part of my life. Our monthly meetings are eagerly awaited and they are a period of time in which I know I can gather my thoughts in a safe and supported environment. I always leave feeling happy and strengthened. I have made some good friends who I know I could turn to if I was ever in need.

This participant's insight provides a concrete example of the power of the simple process. Practical methods can be translated to the workplace. But probably, more profoundly, participating allows an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to help one reflect on one's work within a supportive environment.

What can never be discounted is the period of prayer during the meeting. It focuses the meeting and invites the Spirit. The meetings become a breathing space within the context of business, deepening one's understanding of the place of work within one's life of faith. The sharing after the prayer also provides the richness of the gifts of the Spirit in the diversity, yet uncanny unity, of the reflections. The mutual support in prayer provides a powerful foundation that allows for trust to develop during the meeting and to build as the groups continue throughout the months.

Members also feel a great sense that they are not isolated in their attempts to practice their faith within the work environment. To see how people who you grow to respect handle various challenges in their professional life gives one greater confidence when one's individual challenges emerge. A general sense of gratitude is felt for the privilege of being able to participate in such a supportive yet simple structure.

The current financial crisis tends to distort the understanding of how one can be a Christian in a capitalist system. St. Ignatius warned one not to make definitive judgements in the midst of desolation. The capitalist system provides individual and corporate opportunities to serve humanity; it also obviously provides the opportunity to exploit others through greed and arrogance. One can strive to use the creative skills given by God or one can seek mastery over others to achieve one's exalted pride. The easy social solution is to assume that the latter approach will dominate and feel justified whenever circumstances confirm that opinion. However, in order to release the potential for freedom within the capitalist system, all parts of the culture need to cultivate and nurture the stories that can inspire business leaders to exploit not the greed in the system but the creative spark within all who are made in the image of God. On reflection, the Church is not guilty of creating a discouraging culture: it has attempted to provide forums where business leaders can reflect on the good within themselves and their work. The scripture is meant to immerse itself in all that is redeemable. Man's work is ultimately redeemable, for it is primarily in our daily work that we participate in the co-creative work of God.

For further information on the Business and Leadership Forum see [the Forum's webpage at Heythrop College](#)

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